Models in Ecology

Prerequisites for Lab 3

Maria Kuruvilla

October 2025

### Installing packages

For lab 3, we will use some new packages, namely ‘here’, ‘tidyverse’, and ‘rstan’.

First, in the console copy and paste the following line of code:

install.packages("here")

You can read more about the package [here](https://here.r-lib.org/), which enables easy file referencing.

Repeat to install “tidyverse”:

install.packages("tidyverse")

Tidyverse is a collection of R packages, such as dplyr and ggplot2, that is useful for data science. We will use it in Lab 3 for data processing and data visualization.

Repeat to install “bayesplot”:

install.packages("bayesplot")

We will use bayesplot to visualize posterior distributions of the Bayesian models.

Finally, we need to install [Rstan](https://mc-stan.org/rstan/) to fit Bayesian models. This is optional for undergraduate students.

Prior to installing rstan, you need to configure your R installation to be able to compile C++ code. This might look different depending on your operating system, so please use the [following instructions](https://github.com/stan-dev/rstan/wiki/RStan-Getting-Started) for your system.

You can then install the rstan package by copying and running the following line of code:

install.packages("rstan")

Let’s run the example model that is built into the package to make sure that the package has been installed correctly. To run an example model, type:

example(stan\_model, package = "rstan", run.dontrun = TRUE)

Review Lecture 9, where Bayesian models are introduced. Recall that Bayesian models calculate the posterior distribution, given a prior distribution and a likelihood function. The way that most numerical methods for Bayesian models calculate the posterior distribution is by creating a sequence of random samples from the posterior distribution. Each sequence of random samples is called a chain. Typically, many chains are generated, and when they are plotted out the posterior distribution can be seen.

The example model might take a few minutes to finish running and will print out lines in the console while fitting. These lines should give you information on the number of chains and how many samples per chain have been collected. Look at the output from this example. Note that there are 4 chains. In this example, samples from 1 to 1000 are called “Warmup” and from 1001 to 2000 are called “Sampling”. We will discuss the Warmup versus Sampling chains later.

## Fitting mixed-effects models in Stan - optional material

For Lab 3, graduate students will use the rstan package to fit a Bayesian mixed-effects (or hierarchical) model in R. Undergraduate students will have the option to fit a Bayesian mixed-effects (or hierarchical) model in R, but are not required to.

[Stan](https://mc-stan.org/) is a probabilistic programming language that allows us to run Bayesian statistical models - from linear regression to more complicated multi-level models and time-series analysis.

A Stan program is organized into a sequence of named blocks:

functions {  
 // ... function declarations and definitions ...  
}  
data {  
 // ... declarations ...  
}  
transformed data {  
 // ... declarations ... statements ...  
}  
parameters {  
 // ... declarations ...  
}  
transformed parameters {  
 // ... declarations ... statements ...  
}  
model {  
 // ... declarations ... statements ...  
}  
generated quantities {  
 // ... declarations ... statements ...  
}

All of the blocks are options. Note that comments start with “//” and all lines end with a semicolon “;”.

Here is an example of a linear regression for one salmon population which can be expressed as where is survival in year , is the growth rate, is the density dependence, and is the spawners at year t. Copy the following code into a new stan file (click on new file and then select stan file) within your Rproject and save it as “linear\_regression.stan”.

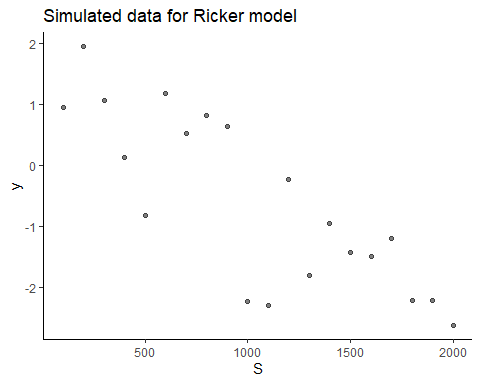
You can make a new stan file in the same way as you made a new R script. Click on ‘+ file’ in the bottom right files window and then select ‘Stan File’. You can name the first file ‘linear\_regression.stan’. This file will open up in the top left portion of the RStudio console. Copy and paste the following code in it. You can check if the code is syntactically correct by clicking on the ‘check’ button on the top right of the window. If you see this warning “Warning message: In readLines(file, warn = TRUE) :incomplete final line found on ‘linear\_regression.stan’”, then just add an empty line to the end of your code by clicking enter. In order to run this code, we will have to write some lines of code in an R Script.

data {  
 int<lower=0> N; //number of observations or years in this case  
 vector[N] S; //predictor of size N  
 vector[N] y; //response variable of size N  
}  
parameters {  
 real r; //intercept to be estimated  
 real b; //slope to be estimated  
 real<lower=0> sigma; //variance to be estimated  
}  
model {  
  
 r ~ normal(1.2, 2); //prior for intercept, based on literature  
 b ~ normal(0, 10); //prior for slope  
 sigma ~ normal(0, 1); //prior for variance  
 y ~ normal(r + b \* S, sigma); // linear model  
}

#### Running Stan code

You now have everything you need to run Lab 3. If you want to try running the stan model for linear regression (from above), let us first generate some data with known values. Copy and run the following lines of code in lab3\_setup.R.

library(tidyverse)  
  
#generate random variables with mean (r + b\*S) and standard deviation sigma  
  
# let r = 1.2, b = -0.002, and S be the data ranging from 100 to 2000   
  
N <- 20 # 20 data points  
r <- 1.2  
b <- -0.002  
S <- seq(100, 2000, length.out = N)  
  
sigma <- 0.8 # standard deviation  
  
set.seed(568) # set seed for reproducibility  
y <- rnorm(N, mean = r + b\*S, sd = sigma) # N samples from a normal distrubution with mean = r+bS and sd = sigma  
  
#plot data  
  
ggplot() +  
 geom\_point(aes(x = S, y = y) , alpha = 0.5) +  
 labs(title = "Simulated data for Ricker model",  
 x = "S",  
 y = "y") +  
 theme\_classic()



Now we need to call the stan model and give it a name within the R Script. Here I am calling it ricker\_linear\_regression\_model and using the stan\_model() function to call the stan model. It might take a minute to run. Then we need to make a data list for the first block of the stan model. Make sure the variables match the variables in the data block of the stan code. We then draw samples from the posterior distribution by using the sampling() function. This function has inputs which are the stan model and the data we provide. We can also specify the number of chains we want to use, how many samples or iterations (iter) we want, and how many warmup iterations to use.

In this context, chains refer to the sequence of samples from the distribution. We usually want more than 1 chain which start at different points to make sure that all chains converge to the same posterior distribution after multiple iterations. We also discard the first 1000 samples (warmup) because we do not want to make inference from these samples, which might be influenced by the starting values of the parameters in the chains.

library(rstan)  
# options for rstan  
rstan\_options("auto\_write" = TRUE)  
  
# runs the chains in parallel  
options(mc.cores = parallel::detectCores())  
  
# call model  
library(here)  
  
# create data list for model  
  
data\_list\_linear\_regression <- list(  
 N = N,  
 S = S,  
 y = y  
)  
  
ricker\_linear\_regression\_model <- stan\_model(file = here("lab3","linear\_regression.stan"))  
  
# sample from model  
ricker\_linear\_regression\_model\_sampling <- rstan::sampling(ricker\_linear\_regression\_model,  
 data = data\_list\_linear\_regression,  
 chains = 4,  
 iter = 2000,  
 warmup = 1000)

The location of the “linear\_regression.stan” file is within a folder called lab3 on my computer. If that is not the case for you, you might have to change the location. This might take ~2 minutes to run. You are ready for lab 3.